

Don't be a litter bug

Volunteers maintain more than 280 segments of road in county

BY CODY CALAMAIO
STAFF WRITER

For weeks leading up to Montgomery County's primary election, enthusiastic volunteers have stuck campaign signs in the ground along Duffie Mill Road in North Potomac, and for weeks Bill Agnostak has thrown them away with the rest of the trash.

"They leave them up and they never take them down," said Agnostak, 62, of North Potomac. "The election comes and goes and the signs are still up."

Election signs are just one form of litter Agnostak and the more than 1,000 volunteers remove on their bimonthly rounds as part of the county's Adopt-A-Road program.

"It's a shame as a society we're not a little neater," Agnostak said.

More than 280 segments of county roads are adopted by individuals or groups, said Tom Pogue, community relations manager in the Department of Transportation.

Two metal signs with a nameplate are placed on either side of the road to mark the turf, and volunteers must commit to clean both sides of their road, and sometimes a median, at least six times per year, Pogue said.

Agnostak cleans solo, while other groups have dozens of volunteers sporting the latest in roadside fashion. The wardrobe provided by the county includes orange safety vests, orange visors and yellow gloves. Orange trash bags and blue recycle bags complete the neon ensemble.

Safety, not fashion, is the goal, Pogue said. Volunteers are given safety guidelines and there never has been an incident.

The bright wardrobe is a motivator for some children who volunteer alongside their parents when the Potomac Chase Women's Club cleans a segment of Jones Lane in North Potomac, coordinator Marion Levine said.

"Kids as young as 3 years old, they put their gloves on and they love wearing their orange safe-

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ty vests," said Levine, 52, of North Potomac.

Families often make a game of it, and the most interesting finds are reported in the club newsletter. It also provides an opportunity for children to get community service hours for school and learn about environmental stewardship.

The Adopt-A-Road program began in 1986 because the county didn't have resources to dedicate to litter removal, Pogue said. Today, the program also plays a role in protecting the environment by removing litter that could end up in streams or the Potomac River.

"It started as kind of an aesthetic program and has evolved into an environmental program as well," he said.

In the past three years, the Division of Highway Services sponsored an eight-week litter removal program along selected roads in the county, Pogue said. The project costs \$50,000 per year, and likely will not be funded this spring.

The upkeep

The county has decided keep the program informal to not overload volunteers with regulations, Pogue said. They ask volunteers to check-in, but don't formally track when roads are cleaned. If a road receives a complaint from a passerby, the group is notified and asked to remedy the problem.

Getting a complaint was hurtful for Phil Levinton, 59, and his wife, Robin Gross, 56, who have been caring for a segment of Turkey Foot Road in Darnestown for more than 10 years under the pseudonym GroLev Enterprises.

"We thought, 'Well geez, if that's one of our neighbors tell them to join us,'" Gross said.



TIN NGUYEN/THE GAZETTE

Bill Agnostak of North Potomac picks up litter, including illegally posted political campaign signs, on Duffie Mill Road, a mile of which he has pledged to clear off trash at least six times per year through the county's Adopt-A-Road program.

Although their sign lists them as an enterprise, GroLev is just two people. Gross was injured at the time of the complaint and said it is hard to keep the road immaculate when people continue to litter.

Technically, an adopter can be removed if they receive three complaints in six months, but it has only happened once, Pogue said. Groups that don't pull their weight usually quit on their own.

"There are a lot of people who do want these roads," Pogue said.

When a new segment of road is adopted it costs the county about \$250 to install two signs, he said. When a segment of road changes hands the bottom nameplate is changed at a cost of \$40 to the county. The program budgets about \$2,000 for supplies and \$2,000 for signs.

There is an average of 15 to 20 new or turnover

roads per year, Pogue said.

Roads such as Randolph Road, Tuckerman Lane, Seven Locks Road, Democracy Boulevard and Briggs Chaney Road have every segment adopted, and a possible motivation might be sign placement, he said.

"The sign is a part of the incentive and it doesn't really matter to us if they want to pick up the litter because it feels good, or to help the environment, or for the sign," Pogue said.

Adopting a road is too much work if you are just in it for the sign, said Bob Weiss, 48, of North Potomac, who volunteers because he wants to keep his neighborhood clean. He owns the business Password Crackers Inc., and his sign simply reads "pwcraack.com" which had led to a few inquiries.

"They say, 'What the heck it that?' I figure if it gets any traffic to the website that's a bonus," Weiss said.

A sign for Joe's Ride and Stride stands along Gold Mine Road in Olney for a different reason.

The Sanford family created a memorial bike ride and run to benefit families that have lost children after their son, Joe, died of a brain tumor in 2002, said his mother, Betsy Sanford, 53, of Laytonsville. The Sanford family cleans a segment of road in honor of Joe, and to give back to the community that has supported the family and its charity.

"The idea of doing the Adopt-A-Road program came because the community has supported all these families and they we thought it would be a nice way to give back," Sanford said.

For the Potomac Chase Women's Club, having a sign with their name on it inspires pride, and motivates them to serve their community, Levine said.

"Taking food to a shelter, nobody really sees that," she said. "This is something people see on a daily basis."

ccalamaio@gazette.net